ARTICLE APPEARED
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BALTIMORE SUN
11 August 1985

Number of Soviets in U.S. called threat to security

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WASHINGTON — Operating from an imposing embassy on 16th Street here that predates the Communist revolution, Soviet spies gather information almost openly in the halls of the federal government and more circumspectly on suburban back roads.

Across the continent, in an affluent San Francisco neighborhood called Cow Hollow, a seven-story brick building houses the Soviet consulate. The American counterintelligence community regards it as the West Coast headquarters for the relentless Soviet pursuit of U.S. high technology, military and otherwise.

These are the most prominent outposts of the hundreds of Soviet and other Eastern bloc agents believed to be operating in the United States. They have become increasingly controversial since the charges that the alleged Walker "spy ring" sold Navy secrets to Moscow for nearly two decades and the first-time ever conviction of an FBI agent for passing bureau information to the Soviet Union.

The Soviets' American outposts are a source of frustration to counterintelligence experts and government officials who believe Washington is needlessly giving Soviet espionage a helping hand by permitting too many official Russians in the United States.

A recent report by the Senate Intelligence Committee put it this way:

"The danger to U.S. national security entailed by larger-than-necessary numbers of Soviet diplomatic and consular officials in the U.S. and Soviet personnel at our embassy and consulates in the Soviet Union requires immediate action."

The mention of Soviet personnel in U.S. facilities was a reference to the fact that while the Soviet Union provides all its own personnel in this country, from janitors to ambassadors, the United States hires Russians for many jobs at U.S. facilities in the Soviet Union.

The report went on to say that while administration officials say they are committed to fixing the problem, little effort has actually been seen.

In fact, President Reagan used his Saturday radio broadcast on June 29 to say the United States should "reduce the size of the hostile intelligence threat we're up against in this country." In the same broadcast, the president said that "we need a balance between the size of the Soviet diplomatic presence in the United States and the U.S. presence in the Soviet Union. . . ."

At the State Department, however, an official involved with the issue says there's no plan to reduce the size of the Soviet contingent in this country. As far as the balance discussed by the president goes, consideration is being given to replacing some Russian workers in U.S. facilities with Americans "when we can afford it and it will contribute to embassy security."

This has been the department's longstanding approach to the question.

The Soviet Union has about 320 persons officially associated with its embassy here and consulate in San Francisco, about evenly divided between diplomats and support personnel such as chauffeurs and janitors. The U.S. counterintelligence community estimates that perhaps as much as 40 percent of the total is composed of professional spies.

The United States has 185 Americans officially working at its embassy and consulate in the Soviet Union, nearly all diplomats. Moscow has not put a limit on the number of Americans it will allow, but the Uited States capped the Soviet presence here at 320 in 1980 as a response to the Soviet invasion of Afghanistan.

These figures do not count the number of Soviets assigned to the United Nations in New York or such changing numbers as trade delegations and the like that allegedly have been used as covers for spies.

In total, according to the FBI, there are approximately 4,300 officials from the Soviet Union, Soviet bloc countries, Cuba and the People's Republic of China in the United States. It is estimated that 30 to 40 percent of them are intelligence professionals.

The arrest on spy charges of former Navy warrant officer John A. Walker Jr., two relatives and a former Navy colleague sent shock waves through both the military and the counterintelligence communities. Mr. Walker was arrested May 21 in Montgomery County after the FBI said he left a plastic bag with classified documents for a Russian contact. That contact was apparently a Soviet diplomat seen in the area of the drop, the FBI says.

John Walker's brother, Arthur, was convicted Friday of seven charges involving espionage.

"The Walker case reinforces our longstanding concern about the extent and scope of Soviet espionage activities in this country," said Sen. Patrick J. Leahy, D-Vt., vice chairman of the Senate Intelligence Committee.

Mr. Leahy and Sen. William S. Cohen, R-Maine, have written an amendment to the State Department authorization bill to limit the number of Soviet diplomats and embassy personnel in this country to the number of Americans in similar positions in the Soviet Union.

In introducing the measure to the Senate, Mr. Leahy said it would speed the reduction of the approximately 200 Russians employed by the U.S. embassy in Moscow and consulate in Leningrad.

It would, as well, he said, require "action to be taken to draw down the numbers of Soviet diplomatic and consular representatives in the United States."

The State Department opposed the amendment, saying the limits on its flexibility in carrying out its own staffing process "could be harmful to U.S. interests."

Last week, the amendment survived in the final version of the State Department authorization bill. The administration has six months to come up with a plan for evening out the numbers.

"It doesn't mean you're going to stop spying here," Senator Leahy told a TV interviewer. "There's no way you could pass a law to outlaw the Soviets spying here, but you could certainly cut down the number of those who have diplomatic immunity and give the FBI a fighting chance. Right now, they don't have that."

According to William Colby, former director of the Central Intelligence Agency, "A good way to handle the Soviets is strict reciprocity. In other words, if we have 10 people,

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they can have 10. There are limits you can put on them, and the best way to do it is straight, equal treatment, both ends, and be just tougher than nails about it."

As for increasing the U.S. presence in Moscow, Mr. Colby said, "I'm all for that. Every set of eyes and ears over there is a big help to us."

John Barron, author of "KGB Today — The Hidden Hand," has called for drastic reductions of Soviet and Eastern bloc spies by mass expulsions. Mr. Barron is widely regarded as having substantial access to U.S. counterintelligence information.

He maintains that diplomatic status allows spies "to wander through Congress, government offices and universities as Soviet lobbyists, to stroll through laboratories, research centers and factories as thieves of technology, to sneak out from their sanctuaries in the night to meet their spies, to daily intercept the telephone conversations of hundreds of thousands of Americans."

Mr. Barron sees little merit in the argument that spies posing as diplomats, called "legals" in the trade, are more visible and thus easier to handle than the "illegals" likely to replace them if the number of diplomats is reduced.

"The utility of an illegal, his ability to circulate, to have entree, is so drastically less than that of a diplomat functioning out of a sanctuary that we would greatly benefit if they had to rely on illegals," he said. "Maintenance and support of an illegal agent is extremely costly. The development and deployment of an illegal requires many years."